

# HISTORIC REVELATION:

## Putting Scripture into its historical/cultural context

The Judeo-Christian faith stands unique among the religions and philosophies of humanity in that God has revealed Himself in history. His self revelation is inescapably intertwined with the recorded events where He has acted in the history of Israel and the early church. Scripture is given in a framework of space/time historic events. It begins with creation and the history of a people, and reaches its climax in the final revelation of God in the life and death of Jesus Christ (Hebr 1:1,2). We cannot comprehend God's revelation in Scripture apart from His involvement in that flow of history.

It is perhaps this concept of the self revelation of the infinite-personal God in finite human history that gives Christianity its uniqueness among the religions and philosophies of humankind. God remains distinct from all the cosmos and all of creation. He is not absorbed in a pantheistic way, reduced to "that" by which we explain or define the cosmos. He is not an unknowable "other" because this same God has acted and spoken in human history. Far from being an abstract philosophic concept encased in myths, legends or philosophic speculation - God has interrupted and directed the flow of human events, and can be objectively known in them. As Dr. Francis Schaeffer says, if you were there at the crucifixion, you could have gotten a splinter from the cross in your finger. God has spoken and acted.

We should see history from the Christian perspective for: "...interwoven throughout this history are the activities of God in a supernatural manner. This distinctive feature of the Old Testament (and New Testament as well) -- the disclosure of God in historical events and messages -- raises it above the level of secular literature and history. Recognition that both the natural and supernatural are vital factors throughout the Bible is indispensable to a full orb'd comprehension of its contents." (Samuel Schultz, The Old Testament Speaks, p.5.) To try and preserve the history while excising the supernatural and miraculous is impossible. God's control, intervention and interpretation of events are inseparable from Scripture's revelation.

Gordon Clark recognized three essential features of a Christian philosophy of history:

- “1) God controls history (Dan 2:21; Acts 17:26), and works out his purposes even in particular events (Gen 50:20; Exod. 12:36; 1 Sam 16:12; 11 Sam 24:1; Isa 10:5-6)
- 2) God will bring history to its climax in the second coming of Christ (2 Thess 1:8)
- 3) God personally acts in all history.” (Carl Henry, God, Revelation and Authority vol. 2, p. 313.)

Scripture is the interpreter of history. It is the unfolding of His purposes. All Scripture and all history rest on the reality that God is the creator (where history has its beginnings) and the Judge (where all history will culminate). The Bible throughout insists that God the creator holds mankind eternally accountable for every thought, word and deed. It teaches that each successive generation moves toward a final future in which God will bring redemption or judgment.

History grounds revelation into the real, objective world. In contrast to pagan myths and cerebral philosophies -- the revelation of God in both word and deed is recorded in Scripture to bring men to a true understanding of an infinite personal God. History as we know it has its origins within the Hebrew Scriptures. The contemporary writings of other peoples are more mythical than historic. Moses rather than Herodotus should be acclaimed the "father of history."

## **The more we understand the world and thinking of Biblical times, the customs, landscape, lifestyles, and people, the clearer will be our understanding of Scripture.**

God has chosen to reveal Himself and His will within the historical and cultural framework of the events of the Bible. We should read the Bible as having had real meaning to the original writers and readers within their cultural context and history, a meaning for us somewhat obscured by our own differing cultural context. The recognition that God's self revelation comes within a historical-cultural context is important. It prevents the misinterpretation that comes by reading into the Bible our cultural contexts. Many cults have been guilty of that very mistake.

"The historic and traditional view is that the revelation of God comes in and through a cultural form, because any revelation from God must come to man in his context, cultural setting and speak to him in terms of his specific culture." (Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 160)

Even within the Bible **there were different cultures and contexts**: Abraham and Mesopotamia, Moses and Egypt, Joshua and the Caananites. The kings dealt with their neighboring superpowers: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. In the New Testament is a background of the successive occupations of inter testamental times and the Maccabean independence on which the Bible is silent. And we need to understand the Judaism of Jesus' day, and the involvement of Roman, Greek, and the cultures of Asia Minor. God's message and doctrines are trans-cultural and have crossed hundreds of cultural boundaries over the centuries, but the Bible was written within the definite context of the 2500 hundred years of the history of ancient Israel.

**The more we know about the ancient Near East of the Bible**, the better we are able to understand the Scriptures. The principal sources for enriching our understanding outside of the Bible are found in geography, archaeology and ancient history. Study in these areas can add much to our understanding. For the student a good Bible atlas, and a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia are useful tools for unlocking this mine. Beyond them are many extremely helpful volumes on the above topics.

**Geography** is very important. "If history is the temporal background of Scripture, then geography is the spatial. The interpreter needs to know the data about mountains, rivers, plains,, crops, flora, seasons and climate.... Many of the passages of the Old Testament become clearer when we understand their geographical location" (Ramm, ibid. p. 153) Many of the figures of speech and symbolic language of Scripture are related to the physical features of the landscape. We ought to see the lands of the Bible in three dimensions, not just a flat colored area on a map, but with the wadi's, mountains, river courses and highways.

**Archaeology** enables us to reconstruct the everyday lives and livelihoods of Biblical times. The varied lives, economic structures, customs, etc. are reflected in the shards of pottery, remains of walls, occasional inscriptions and other fragments that are uncovered by the archaeologist. Much light has been shed on unclear references in the Bible by the discovery of things taken for granted by the ancients in their everyday lives.

**Ancient history** has been laboriously studied and reconstructed with the help of the archaeologist. In the last century. The cultures of ancient Mesopotamia., Egypt, Palestine, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome are now well known and can be seen in museums and studied in libraries.

Knowing the ways of life in Bible times is as important for understanding the Bible as the flow of societies and historical events: how the last supper was eaten around a table where they reclined rather than sat, how houses were constructed so that Sampson could bring down the house while chained to its pillars. Or to know how four men with a paralytic could dig a hole in the roof to lower him to Jesus, and why the Samaritan in the parable was good and the Jewish teachers were not. Along with dictionaries and encyclopedias, there are several useful volumes on manners and customs in Bible times available.

The basic history of Scripture falls into these periods:

**Old Testament: Creation and Prehistoric, Patriarchs,  
Exodus and The Wilderness,  
Conquest, Judges,  
United Kingdom,  
Divided Kingdom, Fall of Isreal, Fall of Judah,  
Exile, Return, (Silent years).  
New Testament: Life of Jesus Christ,  
Early Apostolic Church,  
Ministry of Paul.**

A Bible student should have a grasp on the outlines and history of each book of the Bible. Scripture itself gives us the historical framework in which the various books of the Bible fit.

- Deuteronomy and Leviticus fit within the history of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings covered in Exodus and Numbers, and Genesis was written to explain Isreal's beginnings. Ruth fits in Judges.
- The Poetic books fit within the days of the United Kingdom of which we have parallel accounts in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, each with a distinct perspective on Isreal's history.
- The Prophets fit within the flow of the history of the divided kingdoms, continuing on through the exile into the days of Ezra and Nehemiah and Esther.
- Jesus' ministry and teachings are recorded for us in four parallel accounts in the Gospels.
- The Pauline Epistles have their historical settings in Acts.

Important questions for every Bible student are: Who wrote it? When? Who to? Why? Only as we know what the author's purpose was and the audience he wrote it to can we begin to interpret and then apply its teaching and lessons to ourselves.

In dealing with history and culture in the Bible:

1. Know as much as you can about the people in the section of the Bible you are studying.
2. Determine what historical period is most likely for the passage. Remember that it is more important to know the historical situation than the precise historical date.
3. In a Bible atlas, or dictionary, check the places that provide the geographical setting.
4. Note the customs, objects of material culture, or socio-religious relationships in the section you are studying.
5. Try to see how the history preceding the time of the original hearers or readers influenced their responses and attitudes.
6. See how the story or passage transcends its immediate surroundings. While the biblical narrative may have much in common with the history and culture of neighboring people, the differences are often significant.
7. Be sensitive to the similarities and differences between our culture and that of the original writer and his readers., only then can we make proper applications to ourselves
8. In the case of parallel passages like in Samuel-Kings-Chronicles or the Synoptic Gospels, or Paul's epistles and Acts to be sure and consult the parallels.